

A summer gathering

The WMU Class of 69 celebrated its double-nickel anniversary

A Memory Journey by John Busbee

I had planned to drop in for a couple of hours, then scoot back home, reversing my 2-1/2 hour journey from Des Moines. Getting out for extended social activities stretches the limits of my endurance these days. Reaching the 55-year milestone of high school graduation was not something my youthful mind was thinking about in 1969. This old dog no longer wanders too far beyond his comfort boundaries.

Upon arrival, the welcoming memories oasis created by host Marilyn quickly changed my plans. I savored every interaction, greedily gathering them in a special internal place. This bounty would be treasured for the rest of my earthly years, revisited many times over.

As we entered the Winfield city limits from the north, we were greeted by “Road closed” barriers. Apparently past tales of the Class of ’69 remained alive within the town, as this seemed an attempt to block interloping alum from igniting the flames of another bombastic reunion. Goodness, don’t they realize that we’re now in our seventies? My apprehension was unwarranted.

The hometown Crooked Creek Days were in full swing, creating unexpected traffic snarls. The road closure was to create a two-block long carnival setting for a myriad of festive activities in the heart of our hometown.

Cutting through the Casey’s parking lot and utilizing well-traveled alleys, my wife, Kimberly, and I finally parked in a shaded streetside place, mere steps away from Marilyn’s gaily decorated destination home. The heat of the day had everyone inside, enjoying the cool confines of her home and the warmth of her hospitality.

A beckoning array of folding chairs were strategically placed between the regular chairs and couch of the living room. A dedicated pathway drew people into the dining room, then the kitchen, where a tantalizing array of foods quickly found itself onto people’s plates. Late afternoon dining was the enticing entrée of the day, and the air was filled with a continual peppering of compliments for the feast. Sporadic catching-up conversations punctuated the initial wave of silence from the culinary enjoyment.

The levels of familiarity spanned decades. Some of us had remained in touch since our high school days. Several still lived in the area. For many of us, we could count on one hand the number of times we’d seen each other since graduation. For all of us, our reflections were anchored in those life-forming school days at Winfield-Mount Union High School.

Many spouses joined the festivities, as they had become “honorary” members of our class through wedlock. Chuck and Susie were our high school sweetheart couple, still radiating an inner fire in marriage that reflected their energetic days in high school. Everyone transitioned into a continually moving checkerboard of chats, a constant rekindling of bygone days with tales of misadventure and bonding. The joyous ebb and flow of laughter was palpable, punctuated with pauses as someone shared another spotlight triggering remembrance, creating a new domino effect of reflections.

Merriment was the leading order of the day, yet the mood was tempered with many heartfelt updates and more somber sharings. Hugs spoke unvoiced volumes for loved ones lost. Sporadic gallows humor about the afflictions of our aging were answered with nods and wry counter-commentary, even sardonic retorts. Along with the predominant bounty of tears of laughter were many tears of understanding, comfort, and true caring for each other. The years had produced many gains, often in the

form of children, grandchildren, even great-grandchildren. Those gains were balanced by many losses. Most of our classmates had lost their parents. Many had lost spouses; some even had suffered the grief of losing a child. We were bonded this day through a universal understanding of having lived some seven plus decades, with all that such a span of time delivers.

I often think about the friends I've made over the years who came from large classes. They confess to not knowing too many from their class, or that they were part of a smaller subgroup. Even those smaller tribes strayed from keeping connected. Our class was different.

At Winfield, I experienced a bond with my class of 41 – a large class by today's standards at our alma mater. We knew each other, whether in classes together, sharing extracurricular activities, or not. Enjoying this real face time experience on this August Saturday afternoon, each person held a myriad of stories and memories. The recognizable faces from our school days were overlaid by today's countenances, but each had that inner glow from our school days. Those decades-past markers were still there – a smile, a raised eyebrow, a telling posture. Each person's face, now enhanced by a life of experiences both good and challenging, still retained the reflection of that teenaged classmate.

I don't know if my thoughts mirror any other classmates. I do know that when I came to Winfield halfway through fourth grade, I was emerging from the transient life as an Army brat. My parents would divorce, my maternal grandparents accepted their only daughter and her four children without question. I instantly became an Iowa farm kid. I later realized that I was finally sinking roots into a community I could call home. Friendships formed, and the beginning trail of memory-making began. All of the chaos of small-town life coupled with aging into adolescence and high school became my stability. My compatriots in this journey were my classmates, and I thank each and every one of them for being a part of the journey. It will always be an honor to be a member of the Winfield-Mount Union Class of 1969. Counting the blessings of that honor is a wonderful pastime these days.

*John Busbee graduated from Winfield-Mt. Union High School in 1969. He attributes being raised in a three-generation family farm home as a cornerstone of making him a conscientious contributor to this world, and his time in Winfield as foundational. He published and produced three plays based in small-town Iowa during WW II, *The Bonds of War Trilogy*; is a regular contributor to *Iowa History Journal*, *dsm Magazine*, *ia Magazine*, a regular columnist for *Cityview* and *Little Village* magazines, and continues to produce his weekly radio program, *The Culture Buzz*, available streaming Wednesdays 11A-1P at www.kfmg.org. He received the Iowa Governor's Award for Collaboration & Partnership in the Arts and a 2015 Iowa History Award for his feature story about the Littleon Brothers.*